



Study of the impact of Comenius In-Service Training activities

- Executive Summary -

Friedhelm Maiworm, Heiko Kastner and Hartmut Wenzel

Study on behalf of the European Commission, DG Education and Culture

Kassel 2010

Objectives and Design of the Study

The present study is one of the means of the European Commission to judge the impact of Comenius on school education in Europe and to identify opportunities of increasing the effectiveness of the programme. It is the aim of Comenius In-Service Training (IST) to contribute to the improvement of the European dimension of teacher training as well as to the quality of pedagogical approaches and school management by enabling teachers and other school education staff to undertake training abroad. The target group of the study consisted of successful applicants from all eligible countries who took part in training between January and July 2009. More than 4,000 beneficiaries were asked prior and after the Comenius supported in-service training about their expectations, ways and areas of preparation, experiences during the training period, outcomes and impacts and future plans for international cooperation and activities. A high proportion of more than 80 percent of IST-participants supported the study and responded to at least one of the two surveys.

General fulfilment of the objectives of the action

The results of the study show clearly that Comenius In-Service Training contributes to a significant extent to the professional development of teachers and other educational staff members and triggers impacts not only in the classrooms but also at an institutional level of schools and organisations. The added value of training events abroad becomes visible in an increase in European and international dimensions in teaching and learning and in the establishment of increased cooperation between schools and other types of organisations in other countries. Finally, there is no doubt that this Comenius action is in principle able to meet its objectives. However, a more balanced distribution of participants by subject of teaching and by host country is desirable.

Participants and mobility flows

Teachers and other school educational staff who are nationals or permanent residents in one of the countries participating in the Lifelong Learning Programme are eligible to apply for a grant to undertake a Comenius In-Service Training (IST). It is one of the main findings of the study that the vast majority of participants in 2009 were teachers of the English language. In-service training in another country is by nature particularly attractive for foreign language teachers and finds strong support in schools since the demand for highly qualified (English) language teachers is high in almost all European countries. However, it might be justified to raise the question of whether the strong focus on one subject is the desired result of this Comenius action.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the high proportion of English language teachers among IST-participants, a strong imbalance in the mobility flows between the eligible countries

emerged. While countries in which English is the domestic language hosted far more Comenius beneficiaries than they sent abroad, all other countries had to be classified as sending countries. Although all countries benefited from Comenius through its contribution to the training of teachers and educational staff, the training industry in English-speaking countries receives a much higher share of the funds than those in other countries. Due to the decentralised administration of this strand of Comenius activities the Commission has, however, very little opportunity of influencing the participation in the programme or the balance of mobility flows. Nevertheless, it should be discussed whether this situation should be accepted and tolerated or whether it should be readjusted in accordance with the policy priorities of the European Commission.

Range of activities supported

The Comenius programme currently supports three different types of in-service training: structured training courses, European seminars/conferences and a less formal type of training: job-shadowings/work placements/observation periods. In 2009 as well as in previous years, the vast majority of participants applied for training courses and only about five percent each took part in a European seminar/conference or carried out a period of job-shadowing at a school or educational organisation in another country. Although the reasons for this were not explicitly addressed by the study, it might play a role that most courses could be taken within the holidays and in addition they are a widely known and proven method to train competency and skills in a clearly defined area.

Job-shadowing on the other hand is relatively new and is not so widely established as a training possibility. In addition, it is not so clearly targeted in respect to its outcomes and usually has to be undertaken during the teaching period. Furthermore, it requires a higher degree of prior investment in terms of finding a suitable partner school, in developing an activity plan, etc. which may lead potentially interested teachers or other educational staff being deterred. It is therefore not very likely that job-shadowing, in the current form, will become a popular alternative in the future, which might contribute to a broader spread of IST-participants by subject of teaching and host country. Nevertheless, job shadowing has its specific potentials and is valued highly by those who took part in it. More educational staff might decide in favour of a job-shadowing in future should this type of training be better promoted and if clarity in respect to the potential outcomes could be improved, e.g. through a set of rules of good practice and/or a guideline for the implementation of high quality job-shadowings. Furthermore, job-shadowings could be used as an effective instrument for the strengthening of partnership projects, e.g. Comenius School Partnerships.

Level of grants

The grants provided by National Agencies for participation in Comenius In-Service Training covered on average more than ninety percent of the costs for travel, subsistence and course fees. Although each second participant spent at least some of his/her own money, the cost coverage rate of the Comenius grant in general seems to be sufficient. Differences by home country of participants are due to the responsibility of National Agencies to define ceilings on the maximum amount per cost item. Consequently, participants from different countries attending the same training course might not get the same amount of grant to cover their expenses in the host country. On the one hand, this situation may be a reason for complaints by those who had to spend a higher proportion of their own money. On the other hand, the definition of ceilings allows National Agencies to divide the total budget available for Comenius In-Service Training into as many units as necessary to ensure an appropriate acceptance rate of applications.

Duration of support

Comenius supports in-service training of up to six weeks. In practice, training periods of more than two or three weeks are the exception. On average the training lasted 11 days. It was even shorter in the case of seminars (7 days on average) and slightly longer in the case of a job-shadowing (12 days). There are some indications that longer periods lead to a higher level of outcomes. However, setting a minimum duration would endanger the flexibility of the programme to adapt to the time schedules of individual teachers and would possibly lead to an exclusion of persons with extraordinary time consuming personal or professional obligations.

Quality of courses and seminars

In most courses and seminars, the ratio of lecturers to participants was quite good and the participants on average came from six different countries. However, one quarter of beneficiaries attended a course in which more than half of the participants were compatriots.

The vast majority of respondents praised the quality of the content and academic level of the training, the performance of trainers and the good preparation and active participation of other participants. It is also important to note that two thirds of the respondents were satisfied with the support to continue learning and the follow-up activities (e.g. by provision of learning material) offered after the course ended. Despite the overall good assessment, the few courses of low quality need attention. It is therefore suggested to implement a procedure which allows a continuous and timely quality assurance of training activities attended by IST-participants.

Quality of job-shadowing

Similar to the participants in courses and seminars, the participants in a job-shadowing expressed their satisfaction with the persons they shadowed and the opportunity to get an insight into the day to day practice within the visited institution. In most cases the job-shadowing could be carried out either completely or at least to a large extent as originally planned. The participants did not only observe activities of their trainers but were also involved in the daily activities of the host organisation. Compared to their work at home, almost all participants in a job-shadowing experienced large differences in one way or another. An unexpected result of the study shows that the vast majority of participants shadowed not only one or two colleagues abroad, but three or even more. However, it is not clear whether this was an advantage or more of a disadvantage. Either way, it shows that the understanding and practice of job-shadowing needs more clarification and reinforcement.

Outcomes for participants

In the view of beneficiaries, Comenius In-Service Training is an effective instrument to contribute to the professional development of teachers and other educational staff. Almost all IST-participants considered the outcomes of the Comenius In-Service Training as very valuable. The training contributed not only to an increase in knowledge of the participant's own area of specialisation but also to an acquaintance with new knowledge and skills in various specific fields and to reflection on the participant's own teaching and working methods. Furthermore, proficiency in a foreign language could be improved, intercultural knowledge and competency increased and contacts with colleagues from other countries established. In addition to the rather cognitive outcomes and the establishment of contacts, the vast majority of IST-participants also reported an increased motivation to teach and a willingness to continue to develop personal professional competency. The contribution of the training to the improvement in knowledge and skills in specific areas such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) or the educating of pupils with special needs was considerably lower. However, taking into consideration that only a few participants attended courses or seminars with a focus on these issues, the proportion of those stating significant outcomes is astonishingly high.

Not all participants saw their high expectations prior to the beginning of the training fulfilled in the end. The highest discrepancies in this respect could be observed in the case of participants in a job-shadowing. Accordingly, participants stated on average a lower extent of benefits in specific areas than participants in courses and seminars.

A complex statistical regression analysis was employed to measure the correspondence between the personal background of participants, the profile of the training and the self-assessment of benefits. The results strongly underline the importance of good preparation, the relevance of the composition of participants in courses/seminars and the quality of the training. Those who had been well prepared for the content of the course, most often re-

ported an improvement of knowledge and skills in their own subject area. A good language preparation helps to establish lasting contacts with colleagues from other countries. High outcomes in terms of new contacts are also more likely if courses and seminars are attended by participants from many different countries and if the lecturers take care of a communication culture ensuring frequent discussions and activities between the participants. The most important factor for the success of Comenius In-Service Training is without a doubt, the performance and the quality of the courses and seminars.

Impacts on professional work and on pupils

Most respondents were able to apply the newly gained knowledge in their professional work. Although the high motivation and the euphoria towards new approaches and changes of daily routines directly after the training period abroad seems to diminish gradually, in the majority of cases lasting impacts on the international orientation of beneficiaries and the ways of teaching in the classroom could be observed. Head teachers, colleagues and pupils who might be affected through the application of new knowledge and skills by IST-participants, reacted in most cases positively.

The improvement of learning processes of pupils is the third link in the chain of outcomes and impacts of Comenius In-Service Training and it is a direct result of changes of contents and teaching methods, i.e. the ways in which the professional work is conducted. Overall, the majority of IST-participants reported not only a substantial improvement of subject/content related learning processes but also an increase of social and personal competency of pupils.

Impacts at institutional level

Although the impact of Comenius In-Service Training at the institutional level was finally in some areas considerable lower than expected by participants prior to the training, a remarkably high proportion stated benefits for their school or organisation as a whole. Most frequently, a change in the attitude of colleagues was reported which became visible not only in a growing interest to participate in Comenius In-Service Training but also in an increased willingness to learn a foreign language. Further important areas of impacts were the introduction of new teaching and learning methods, the improvement of existing course offerings and the internationalisation of schools and other educational organisations. In comparison to the small number of IST-participants in management positions, i.e. head teachers, etc., the frequency of reports about impacts on management strategies, ideas or practices is also astonishingly high. As a side effect of Comenius In-Service Training, the interest of nearly all surveyed teachers and educational staff in participation in other European or international cooperation and activities is increased. Concrete plans to set up one or more joint Comenius activities with schools and persons from other countries were reported by about one quarter of respondents.

Beneficiaries who attended courses noticed most often an impact on the motivation of colleagues to take also part in Comenius In-Service Training and, additionally, on the improvement of the content and methods of teaching within the home institution.

Participants in a job-shadowing on the other hand stated a comparably high impact on the internationalisation of their schools and concrete plans for joint Comenius activities with partner schools in other countries.

IST-participants from schools and organisations which made use of Comenius In-Service Training in a strategic way, i.e. as an instrument for internationalisation or for staff development, stated considerably more often an impact at the institutional level. The effects are particularly high in schools and organisations which used Comenius for both internationalisation and staff development. The effectiveness of this Comenius action obviously could be improved by using the strategic embedding of the training within the home institution as award criteria.

Dissemination of results

Besides informal discussions which obviously led to a strong increase in the interest of colleagues in Comenius In-Service Training, the majority of IST-participants also reported in a more formal way about their training experiences, e.g. in the form of oral presentations or through the publishing of articles in newspapers or journals for professional associations. Addressees of presentations were not only colleagues from the participant's own school but also frequently teachers and colleagues from other schools or institutions. Only a very small number of IST-participants did not intend to disseminate their experiences in any way.

Recognition

A formal recognition of the participation in Comenius In-Service Training is an important means of expressing the appreciation of this kind of training and to encourage other teachers and educational staff members to also take part in the programme. The vast majority of the surveyed IST-participants received such a formal recognition either from the management of their school or organisation or from a (school) authority at regional or national level. However, differences by home country show that national regulations and country specific cultures in dealing with in-service training shaped the extent of formal recognition.

Obstacles and difficulties prior and during the Comenius In-Service Training

By and large, the participation in a Comenius supported training activity seems to be possible without significant problems. As far as difficulties were encountered, the reasons lie more often in the private sphere of participants, e.g. the interruption of personal obligations such as childcare, than in the conditions of employment or the modalities of the Comenius programme. Only a small number of respondents stated problems caused by the level of financial support, the workload for the completion of the application, a late decision by the National Agency or a late payment of the Comenius grant. Problems related to employment such as the finding of a replacement during the training period or to in obtaining the approval from the school/ organisation were also not frequent.

During the training period each tenth complained about the lack of availability of rooms for self-study or large differences in the knowledge of participants. Difficulties with the quality of accommodation, administrative/organisational matters, financial matters, etc. were stated each by only a small number of participants.

Due to the low level to which participants were confronted with problems prior or during the Comenius In-Service Training, there is no urgent need for action. Nevertheless, late decisions by National Agencies or late payments of Comenius grants should be avoided.

Overall satisfaction of participants

In market research, the extent of satisfaction of customers is usually the most important indicator when judging a product. On this basis, Comenius In-Service Training has to be considered a very good opportunity for teachers and educational staff to improve their professional competency and skills. Overall, 93 percent of the IST-participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the outcomes and benefits of the Comenius In-Service Training. Only 6 percent had some reservations and only a small number of beneficiaries were dissatisfied. A multivariate statistical analysis leads to the result that the extent of satisfaction is strongly dependent on the quality of the training, its contribution to individual professional development, the extent to which lasting contacts with colleagues from abroad were established, the impact on colleagues and pupils and the contribution to the internationalisation of the participant's own school or organisation.

*Gesellschaft für Empirische Studien bR, Maiworm & Over
Amselstraße 7, D-34128 Kassel
www.ges-kassel.de*

*Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg
Zentrum für Schul- und Bildungsforschung
Franckeplatz 1, Haus 31, D-06099 Halle / Saale
www.zsb.uni-halle.de*